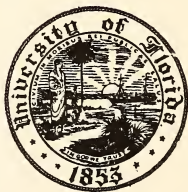


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## *SPRINGBOARD*

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POEMS

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*Springboard*

*1941-1944*

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LOUIS MACNEICE

*RANDOM HOUSE*

*NEW YORK*

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## II

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## NOTE

Many of my titles in this book have the definite article, e.g. "The Satirist," "The Conscript." The reader must not think that I am offering him a set of Theophrastean characters. I am not generalising; "The Conscript" does not stand for all conscripts but for an imagined individual; any such individual seems to me to have an absolute quality which the definite article recognises.

Compare the popular use of "the  
Wife," "the Old Man,"  
"the Baby."



## TO HEDLI

Because the velvet image,  
Because the lilting measure,  
No more convey my meaning  
I am compelled to use  
Such words as disabuse  
My mind of casual pleasure  
And turn it towards a centre—  
A zone which others too  
And you  
May choose to enter.



# I

---

*Even poisons praise thee*

GEORGE HERBERT





## PRAYER BEFORE BIRTH

I am not yet born; O hear me.  
Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the  
club-footed ghoul come near me.

I am not yet born, console me.  
I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

I am not yet born; provide me  
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk  
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light  
in the back of my mind to guide me.

I am not yet born; forgive me  
For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words  
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,  
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,  
my life when they murder by means of my  
hands, my death when they live me.

I am not yet born; rehearse me  
In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when  
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains  
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white  
waves call me to folly and the desert calls  
me to doom and the beggar refuses  
my gift and my children curse me.

I am not yet born; O hear me,  
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God  
come near me.

I am not yet born; O fill me  
With strength against those who would freeze my  
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,  
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with  
one face, a thing, and against all those  
who would dissipate my entirety, would  
blow me like thistledown hither and  
thither or hither and thither  
like water held in the  
hands would spill me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.  
Otherwise kill me.

## PRECURSORS

O that the rain would come—the rain in big battalions—  
Or thunder flush the hedge a more clairvoyant green  
Or wind walk in and whip us and strip us or booming  
Harvest moon transmute this muted scene.

But all is flat, matt, mute, unlivened, unexpectant,  
And none but insects dare to sing or pirouette;  
That Man is a dancer is an anachronism—  
Who has forgotten his steps or hardly learnt them yet.

Yet one or two we have known who had the gusto  
Of wind or water-spout, and one or two  
Who carry an emerald lamp behind their faces  
And—during thunder-storms—the light comes shining through.

## EXPLORATIONS

The whale butting through scarps of moving marble,  
The tapeworm probing the intestinal darkness,  
The swallows drawn collectively to their magnet,  
    These are our prototypes and yet,  
Though we may envy them still, they are merely patterns  
    To wonder at—and forget.

For the ocean-carver, cumbrous but unencumbered,  
Who, tired of land, looked for his freedom and frolic in water,  
Though he succeeded, has failed; it is only instinct  
    That plots his graph and he,  
Though appearing to us a free and a happy monster, is merely  
    An appanage of the sea.

And the colourless blind worm, triumphantly self-degraded,  
Who serves as an image to men of the worst adjustment—  
Oxymoron of parasitical glory—  
    Cannot even be cursed,  
Lacking the only pride of his way of life, not knowing  
    That he has chosen the worst.

So even that legion of birds who appear so gladly  
Purposeful, with air in their bones, enfranchised  
Citizens of the sky and never at odds with  
    The season or out of line,  
Can be no model to us; their imputed purpose  
    Is a foregone design—

And ours is not. For we are unique, a conscious  
Hoping and therefore despairing creature, the final  
Anomaly of the world, we can learn no method  
    From whales or birds or worms;  
Our end is our own to be won by our own endeavour  
    And held on our own terms.

## MUTATIONS

If there has been no spiritual change of kind  
Within our species since Cro-Magnon Man  
And none is looked for now while the millennia cool,  
Yet each of us has known mutations in the mind  
When the world jumped and what had been a plan  
Dissolved and rivers gushed from what had seemed a pool.

For every static world that you or I impose  
Upon the real one must crack at times and new  
Patterns from new disorders open like a rose  
And old assumptions yield to new sensation;  
The Stranger in the wings is waiting for his cue,  
The fuse is always laid to some annunciation.

Surprises keep us living: as when the first light  
Surprised our infant eyes or as when, very small,  
Clutching our parents' hands we toddled down a road  
Where all was blank and windless both to touch and sight  
Had we not suddenly raised our eyes which showed  
The long grass blowing wild on top of the high wall.

For it is true, surprises break and make,  
As when the baton falls and all together the hands  
On the fiddle-bows are pistons, or when crouched above  
His books the scholar suddenly understands  
What he has thought for years—or when the inveterate rake  
Finds for once that his lust is becoming love.

## BROTHER FIRE

When our brother Fire was having his dog's day  
Jumping the London streets with millions of tin cans  
Clanking at his tail, we heard some shadow say  
"Give the dog a bone"—and so we gave him ours;  
Night after night we watched him slaver and crunch away  
The beams of human life, the tops of topless towers.

Which gluttony of his for us was Lenten fare  
Who mother-naked, suckled with sparks, were chill  
Though cotted in a grill of sizzling air  
Striped like a convict—black, yellow and red;  
Thus were we weaned to knowledge of the Will  
That wills the natural world but wills us dead.

O delicate walker, babbler, dialectician Fire,  
O enemy and image of ourselves,  
Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear,  
When you were looting shops in elemental joy  
And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,  
Echo your thoughts in ours? "Destroy! Destroy!"

## THE TROLLS

( *Written after an air-raid, April 1941* )

( i )

In the misty night humming to themselves like morons  
They ramble and rumble over the roof-tops, stumble and  
    shamble from pile to pillar,  
In clodhopping boots that crunch the stars  
And a blank smirk on their faces:  
    *Pretty Polly won't die yet.*

Skittle-alley horseplay, congurgitation . . . they don't know  
    what they are doing,  
All they can do is stutter and lurch, riding their hobby,  
    grinding  
Their hobnails into our bodies, into our brains, into the domed  
Head where the organ music lingers:  
    *Pretty Polly won't die yet.*

Here they come—I thought we had lost them—  
Here they come once more and once too many with their  
    rough and  
Tumble antics, here they  
Are, they are, they ARE:  
    *Pretty Polly won't die yet,*  
    *Oh, won't she?*

( ii )

Than which not any could be found other  
And outside which is less than nothing—  
This, as they call it, life.  
But such as it is, gurgling and tramping, licking their thumbs  
    before they

Turn the pages over, tear them out, they  
Wish it away, they  
Puff with enormous cheeks, put paid to  
Hours and minutes—thistledown in the void.

( iii )

Death has a look of finality;  
We think we lose something but if it were not for  
Death we should have nothing to lose, existence  
Because unlimited would merely be existence  
Without incarnate value. The trolls can occasion  
Our death but they are not able  
To use it as we can use it.  
Fumbling and mumbling they try to  
Spell out Death correctly; they are not able.

( iv )

Than which not any. Time  
Swings on the poles of death  
And the latitude and the longitude of life  
Are fixed by death, and the value  
Of every organism, act and moment  
Is, thanks to death, unique.

( v )

This then is our answer under  
The crawl of lava, a last  
Shake of the fist at the vanishing sky, at the hulking  
Halfwit demons who rape and slobber, who assume  
That when we are killed no more will be heard of us—  
Silence of men and trolls' triumph.  
A wrong—in the end—assumption.



Barging and lunging out of the clouds, a daft  
Descent of no-good gods, they think to  
Be rid for ever of the voice of men but they happen  
To be trying what even trolls  
Can never accomplish, they happen  
To be—for all their kudos—  
Wrong, wrong in the end.

## TROLL'S COURTSHIP

I am a lonely Troll after my gala night;  
I have knocked down houses and stamped my feet on the  
people's heart,  
I have trundled round the sky with the executioner's cart  
And dropped my bait for corpses, watched them bite,  
But I am a lonely Troll—nothing in the end comes right.

In a smoking and tinkling dawn with fires and broken glass  
I am a lonely Troll; my tributes are in vain  
To Her to whom if I had even a human brain  
I might have reached but, as it is, the epochs pass  
And leave me unfulfilled, no further than I was.

Because I cannot accurately conceive  
Any ideal, even ideal Death,  
My curses and my boasts are merely a waste of breath,  
My lusts and lonelinesses grunt and heave  
And blunder round among the ruins that I leave.

Yet from the lubber depths of my unbeing I  
Aspire to Her who was my Final Cause but who  
Is always somewhere else and not to be spoken to,  
Is always nowhere: which is in the long run why  
I make for nowhere, make a shambles of the sky.

Nostalgia for the breasts that never gave nor could  
Give milk or even warmth has desolated me,  
Clutching at shadows of my nullity  
That slink and mutter through the leafless wood  
Which thanks to me is dead, is dead for good.

A cone of ice enclosing liquid fire,  
Utter negation in a positive form,  
That would be how She is, the nadir and the norm  
Of dissolution and the constant pyre  
Of all desirable things—that is what I desire

And therefore cry to Her with the voice of broken bells  
To come, visibly, palpably, to come,  
Gluing my ear to gutted walls but walls are dumb,  
All I can catch is a gurgle as of the sea in shells  
But not Her voice—for She is always somewhere else.

## CONVOY

Together, keeping in line, slow as if hypnotised  
Across the blackboard sea in sombre echelon  
The food-ships draw their wakes. No Euclid could have devised  
Neater means to a more essential end—  
Unless the chalk breaks off, the convoy is surprised.

The cranks go up and down, the smoke-trails tendril out,  
The precious cargoes creak, the signals clack,  
All is under control and nobody need shout,  
We are steady as we go, and on our flanks  
The little whippet warships romp and scurry about.

This is a bit like us: the individual sets  
A course for all his soul's more basic needs  
Of love and pride-of-life, but sometimes he forgets  
How much their voyage home depends upon pragmatic  
And ruthless attitudes—destroyers and corvettes.

## SENTRIES

At the sharp corners of the world, behind  
Sandbags or concrete or barbed wire,  
Wait the unthinking champions of the mind  
Through sombre days or nights of hectic fire;  
Without heroics, beautifully uncouth,  
Beneath their heavy boots the squelching past  
But in their eyes the Future gathering fast  
And in their hands unformulated truth.

May these attain to know what they believe,  
Live what they know, before the girders part  
And chaos drags them under—these naïve  
Sentries of the complicated heart.

## WHIT MONDAY

Their feet on London, their heads in the grey clouds,  
The Bank (if you call it a holiday) Holiday crowds  
Stroll from street to street, cocking an eye  
For where the angel used to be in the sky;  
But the Happy Future is a thing of the past and the street  
Echoes to nothing but their dawdling feet.  
*The Lord's my shepherd*—familiar words of myth  
Stand up better to bombs than a granite monolith,  
Perhaps there is something in them. *I'll not want—*  
Not when I'm dead. *He makes me down to lie—*  
Death my christening and fire my font—  
*The quiet* (Thames or Don's or Salween's) *waters by.*

1942

## SWING-SONG

I'm only a wartime working girl,  
The machine shop makes me deaf,  
I have no prospects after the war  
And *my* young man is in the R.A.F.  
    K for Kitty calling P for Prue . . .  
    Bomb Doors Open . . .  
    Over to You.

Night after night as he passes by  
I wonder what he's gone to bomb  
And I fancy in the jabber of the mad machines  
That I hear him talking on the intercomm.  
    K for Kitty calling P for Prue . . .  
    Bomb Doors Open . . .  
    Over to You.

So there's no one in the world, I sometimes think,  
Such a wall flower as I  
For I must talk to myself on the ground  
While he is talking to his friends in the sky:  
    K for Kitty calling P for Prue . . .  
    Bomb Doors Open . . .  
    Over to You.

## BOTTLENECK

Never to fight unless from a pure motive  
And for a clear end was his unwritten rule  
Who had been in books and visions to a progressive school  
And dreamt of barricades, yet being observant  
Knew that that was not the way things are:  
This man would never make a soldier or a servant.

When I saw him last, carving the longshore mist  
With an ascetic profile, he was standing  
Watching the troopship leave, he did not speak  
But from his eyes there peered a furtive footsore envy  
Of these who sailed away to make an opposed landing—  
So calm because so young, so lethal because so meek.

Where he is now I could not say; he will,  
The odds are, always be non-combatant  
Being too violent in soul to kill  
Anyone but himself, yet in his mind  
A crowd of odd components mutter and press  
For compromise with fact, longing to be combined  
Into a working whole but cannot jostle through  
The permanent bottleneck of his highmindedness.



## NEUTRALITY

The neutral island facing the Atlantic,  
The neutral island in the heart of man,  
Are bitterly soft reminders of the beginnings  
That ended before the end began.

Look into your heart, you will find a County Sligo,  
A Knocknarea with for navel a cairn of stones,  
You will find the shadow and sheen of a moleskin mountain  
And a litter of chronicles and bones.

Look into your heart, you will find fermenting rivers,  
Intricacies of gloom and glint,  
You will find such ducats of dream and great doubloons of  
ceremony  
As nobody today would mint.

But then look eastward from your heart, there bulks  
A continent, close, dark, as archetypal sin,  
While to the west off your own shores the mackerel  
Are fat—on the flesh of your kin.

## THE CONSCRIPT

Being so young he feels the weight of history  
Like clay around his boots; he would, if he could, fly  
In search of a future like a sycamore seed  
But is prevented by his own Necessity,  
His own yet alien, which, whatever he may plead,  
To every question gives the same reply.

Choiceless therefore, driven from pillar to post,  
Expiating his pedigree, fulfilling  
An oracle whose returns grow less and less,  
Bandied from camp to camp to practise killing  
He fails even so at times to remain engrossed  
And is aware, at times, of life's largesse.

From camp to camp, from Eocene to chalk,  
He lives a paradox, lives in a groove  
That runs dead straight to an ordained disaster  
So that in two dimensions he must move  
Like an automaton, yet his inward stalk  
Vertically aspires and makes him his own master.

Hence, though on the flat his life has no  
Promise but of diminishing return,  
By feeling down and upwards he can divine  
That dignity which far above him burns  
In stars that yet are his and which below  
Stands rooted like a dolmen in his spine.

## NUTS IN MAY

May come up with bird-din  
And May come up with sun-dint,  
May come up with water-wheels  
And May come up with iris.

In the sun-peppered meadow the shepherds are old,  
Their flutes are broken and their tales are told,  
And their ears are deaf when the guns unfold  
The new philosophy over the wold.

May come up with pollen of death,  
May come up with cordite,  
May come up with a chinagraph  
And May come up with a stopwatch.

In the high court of heaven Their tail-feathers shine  
With cowspit and bullspit and spirits of wine,  
They know no pity, being divine,  
And They give no quarter to thine or mine.

May come up with Very lights,  
May come up with duty,  
May come up with a bouncing cheque,  
An acid-drop and a bandage.

Yes, angels are frigid and shepherds are dumb,  
There is no holy water when the enemy come,  
The trees are askew and the skies are a-hum  
And you have to keep mum and go to it and die for your life and  
keep mum.

May come up with fiddle-bows,  
May come up with blossom,  
May come up the same again,  
The same again but different.

## THE MIXER

With a pert moustache and a ready candid smile  
He has played his way through twenty years of pubs,  
Deckchairs, lounges, touchlines, junctions, homes,  
And still as ever popular, he roams  
Far and narrow, mimicking the style  
Of other people's leisure, scattering stubs.

Colourless, when alone, and self-accused,  
He is only happy in reflected light  
And only real in the range of laughter;  
Behind his eyes are shadows of a night  
In Flanders but his mind long since refused  
To let that time intrude on what came after.

So in this second war which is fearful too,  
He cannot away with silence but has grown  
Almost a cypher, like a Latin word  
That many languages have made their own  
Till it is worn and blunt and easy to construe  
And often spoken but no longer heard.

## NOSTALGIA

In cock-wattle sunset or grey  
Dawn when the dagger  
Points again of longing  
For what was never home  
We needs must turn away  
From the voices that cry "Come"—  
That under-sea ding-donging.

Dingle-dongle, bells and bluebells,  
Snapdragon solstice, lunar lull,  
The wasp circling the honey  
Or the lamp soft on the snow—  
These are the times at which  
The will is vulnerable,  
The trigger-finger slow,  
The spirit lonely.

These are the times at which  
Aloneness is too ripe  
When homesick for the hollow  
Heart of the Milky Way  
The soundless clapper calls  
And we would follow  
But earth and will are stronger  
And nearer—and we stay.

## BABEL

There was a tower that went before a fall.

Can't we ever, my love, speak in the same language?  
Its nerves grew worse and worse as it grew tall.

Have we no aims in common?

As children we were bickering over beads—

Can't we ever, my love, speak in the same language?  
The more there are together, Togetherness recedes.

Have we no aims in common?

Exiles all as we are in a foreign city,

Can't we ever, my love, speak in the same language?  
We cut each other's throats out of our great self-pity—  
Have we no aims in common?

Patriots, dreamers, die-hards, theoreticians, all,

Can't we ever, my love, speak in the same language,  
Or shall we go, still quarrelling over words, to the wall?  
Have we no aims in common?

## SCHIZOPHRENE

Hearing offstage the taps filling the bath  
The set dissolves to childhood—in her cot  
Hearing that ominous relentless noise  
Which the grown-ups have started, who are not  
She knows, aware of what it means; it means  
The Dark, the Flood, the Malice. It destroys  
All other meanings—dolls or gingerbread;  
It means a Will that wills all children dead.

Hearing the gasfire breathe monotonously  
She waits for words but no words come, she lifts  
A soapstone hand to smooth her hair and feels  
The hand is someone else's—the scene shifts  
To a cold desert where the wind has dropped  
And the earth's movement stopped and something steals  
Up from the grit through nerve and bone and vein  
To flaunt its iron tendrils in her brain.

Hearing again the telegraph wires again  
Humming again and always, she must lean  
Against the humming post and search her mind  
For what it is they say; in some latrine  
She knows she wrote it first upon the wall  
In self-incrimination, duly signed;  
And, unrevoked since then, that signature  
Runs round the world on wires, accusing her.

Hearing the church-bells too, she knows at once  
That only she can hear them for it is no  
Church or even belfry where they hang,  
There are no ropes attached or ringers down below,

These bells are disembodied, they express  
The claims of frozen Chaos and will clang  
Till this and every other world shall melt  
And Chaos be Itself and nothing felt.

Lastly, hearing the cock in the grey dawn  
Crow once, crow twice, she shivers and dissolves  
To someone else who in the hour of trial  
Denied his Master and his guilt devolves  
On her head only. If she could speak up,  
She might even now atone for that denial  
But the grey cock still crows and she knows why;  
For she must still deny, deny, deny.



## ALCOHOL

On golden seas of drink, so the Greek poet said,  
Rich and poor are alike. Looking around in war  
We watch the many who have returned to the dead  
Ordering time-and-again the same-as-before:

Those Haves who cannot bear making a choice,  
Those Have-nots who are bored with having nothing to choose,  
Call for their drinks in the same tone of voice,  
Find a factitious popular front in booze.

Another drink: Bacchylides was right  
And self-deception golden—Serve him quick,  
The siphon stutters in the archaic night,  
The flesh is willing and the soul is sick.

Another drink: Adam is back in the Garden.  
Another drink: the snake is back on the tree.  
Let your brain go soft, your arteries will harden;  
If God's a peeping tom he'll see what he shall see.

Another drink: Cain has slain his brother.  
Another drink: Cain, they say, is cursed.  
Another and another and another—  
The beautiful ideologies have burst.

A bottle swings on a string. The matt-grey iron ship,  
Which ought to have been the Future, sidles by  
And with due auspices descends the slip  
Into an ocean where no auspices apply.

Take away your slogans; give us something to swallow,  
Give us beer or brandy or schnapps or gin;  
This is the only road for the self-betrayed to follow—  
The last way out that leads not out but in.

## THE LIBERTINE

In the old days with married women's stockings  
Twisted round his bedpost he felt himself a gay  
Dog but now his liver has begun to groan,  
Now that pick-ups are the order of the day:  
O leave me easy, leave me alone.

Voluptuary in his 'teens and cynic in his twenties,  
He ran through women like a child through growing hay  
Looking for a lost toy whose capture might atone  
For his own guilt and the cosmic disarray:  
O leave me easy, leave me alone.

He never found the toy and has forgotten the faces,  
Only remembers the props . . . a scent-spray  
Beside the bed or a milk-white telephone  
Or through the triple ninon the acrid trickle of day:  
O leave me easy, leave me alone.

Long fingers over the gunwale, hair in a hair-net,  
Furs in January, cartwheel hats in May,  
And after the event the wish to be alone—  
Angels, goddesses, bitches, all have edged away:  
O leave me easy, leave me alone.

So now, in middle age, his erotic programme  
Torn in two, if after such a delay  
An accident should offer him his own  
Fulfilment in a woman, still he would say:  
O leave me easy, leave me alone.

## EPITAPH FOR LIBERAL POETS

If in the latter

End—which is fairly soon—our way of life goes west  
And some shall say *So What* and some *What Matter*,  
Ready under new names to exploit or be exploited,  
What, though better unsaid, would we have history say  
Of us who walked in our sleep and died on our Quest?

We who always had, but never admitted, a master,  
Who were expected—and paid—to be ourselves,  
Conditioned to think freely, how can we  
Patch up our broken hearts and modes of thought in plaster  
And glorify in chromium-plated stories  
Those who shall supersede us and cannot need us—  
The tight-lipped technocratic Conquistadores?

The Individual has died before; Catullus  
Went down young, gave place to those who were born old  
And more adaptable and were not even jealous  
Of his wild life and lyrics. Though our songs  
Were not so warm as his, our fate is no less cold.

Such silence then before us, pinned against the wall,  
Why need we whine? There is no way out, the birds  
Will tell us nothing more; we shall vanish first,  
Yet leave behind us certain frozen words  
Which some day, though not certainly, may melt  
And, for a moment or two, accentuate a thirst.

## THE SATIRIST

Who is that man with the handshake? Don't you know?  
He is the pinprick master, he can dissect  
All your moods and manners, he can discover  
A selfish motive for anything—and collect  
His royalties as recording angel. No  
Reverence here for hero, saint or lover.

Who is that man so deftly filling his pipe  
As if creating something? That's the reason:  
He is not creative at all, his mind is dry  
And bears no blossoms even in the season,  
He is an onlooker, a heartless type,  
Whose hobby is giving everyone else the lie.

Who is that man with eyes like a lonely dog?  
Lonely is right. He knows that he has missed  
What others miss unconsciously. Assigned  
To a condemned ship he still must keep the log  
And so fulfil the premises of his mind  
Where large ideals have bred a satirist.

## THIS WAY OUT

You're not going yet? I must; I have to work.  
Though no one better relished halcyon days  
Behind his eyes the winch of will was busy  
And dizzy ways led zigzag through the murk.

So deprecatingly he blew a nought  
In smoke and threw the stub into the purring grate  
And left us, as he always did, to follow  
His colonising fate through Africas of thought.

He always broke off so, abrupt but shy  
In knowledge of his mission, veered and tacked  
To his own breezes—till as a variation  
His explanation cracked and threw the words awry:  
You're not going yet? I must; I have to die.

## THYESTES

When the King sat down to the feast and the golden lid  
revealed

The human outlets and the Graces sang  
Their lays of love returned and lovers meeting,  
Did his blood tell him what his mind concealed?  
Didn't he know—or did he—what he was eating?

Thus Here and We, neither of which is what  
The mind and map admit, in perfidy are linked;  
This green foam frets away our sense of duty  
While we, who watch it blossom and bulge, are not  
Spectators in our hearts but murderers of beauty.

Cannibalism and incest: such is time,  
A trail of shaking candles, such are we  
Who garnish to pollute and breed to kill—  
Messmates in the eucharist of crime  
And heirs to two of those three black crosses on the hill.

## PRAYER IN MID-PASSAGE

O Thou my monster, Thou my guide,  
Be with me where the bluffs divide  
Nor let me contemplate return  
To where my backward chattels burn  
In haunts of friendship and untruth—  
The Cities of the Plain of Youth.

O pattern of inhuman good,  
Hard critic of our thought and blood,  
By whose decree there is no zone  
Where man can live by men alone,  
Unveil Thyself that all may see  
Thy fierce impersonality.

We were the past—and doomed because  
We were a past that never was;  
Yet grant to men that they may climb  
This time-bound ladder out of time  
And by our human organs we  
Shall thus transcend humanity.

Take therefore, though Thou disregard,  
This prayer, this hymn, this feckless word,  
O Thou my silence, Thou my song,  
To whom all focal doubts belong  
And but for whom this breath were breath—  
Thou my meaning, Thou my death.

## PROSPECT

Though loves languish and sour  
Fruit puts the teeth on edge,  
Though the ragged nests are empty of song  
In the barbed and blistered hedge,

Though old men's lives and children's bricks  
Spell out a Machiavellian creed,  
Though the evil Past is ever present  
And the happy Present is past indeed,

Though the stone grows and grows  
That we roll up the hill  
And the hill grows and grows  
And gravity conquers still,

Though Nature's laws exploit  
And defeat anarchic men,  
Though every sandcastle concept  
Being *ad hoc* must crumble again,

And though today is arid,  
We know—and knowing bless—  
That rooted in futurity  
There is a plant of tenderness.



## THE SPRINGBOARD

He never made the dive—not while I watched.  
High above London, naked in the night  
Perched on a board. I peered up through the bars  
Made by his fear and mine but it was more than fright  
That kept him crucified among the budding stars.

Yes, it was unbelief. He knew only too well  
That circumstances called for sacrifice  
But, shivering there, spreadeagled above the town,  
His blood began to haggle over the price  
History would pay if he were to throw himself down.

If it would mend the world, that would be worth while  
But he, quite rightly, long had ceased to believe  
In any Utopia or in Peace-upon-Earth;  
His friends would find in his death neither ransom nor reprieve  
But only a grain of faith—for what it was worth.

And yet we know he knows what he must do.  
There above London where the gargoyles grin  
He will dive like a bomber past the broken steeple,  
One man wiping out his own original sin  
And, like ten million others, dying for the people.



## II

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*Lascio lo fele e vo per dolci pomi*

DANTE



THE CASUALTY  
( *in memoriam G.H.S.* )

"Damn!" you would say if I were to write the best  
Tribute I could to you, "All clichés," and you would grin  
Dwindling to where that faded star allures  
Where no time presses and no days begin—  
Turning back shrugging to the misty West  
Remembered out of Homer but now yours.

Than whom I do not expect ever again  
To find a more accordant friend, with whom  
I could be silent knowledgeably; you never  
Faked or flattered or time-served. If ten  
Winds were to shout you down or twenty oceans boom  
Above the last of you, they will not sever

That thread of so articulate silence. How  
You died remains conjecture; instantaneous  
Is the most likely—that the shutter fell  
Congealing the kaleidoscope at Now  
And making all your past contemporaneous  
Under that final chord of the mid-Atlantic swell.

So now the concert is over, the seats vacated,  
Eels among the footlights, water up to the roof  
And the gilded cherubs crumbling—and you come in  
Jaunty as ever but with a half-frustrated  
Look on your face, you expect the show to begin  
But you are too late and cannot accept the proof

That you are too late because you have died too early  
And this is under sea. Puzzled but gay  
You still come in, come in, and the waves distort  
Your smile and chivvy your limbs through a maze of pearly  
Pillars of ocean death—and yet you force your way  
In on my dreams as if you had something still to report.

How was it then? How is it? You and I  
Have often since we were children discussed death  
And sniggered at the preacher and wondered how  
He can talk so big about mortality  
And immortality more. But you yourself could now  
Talk big as any—if you had the breath.

However since you cannot from this date  
Talk big or little, since you cannot answer  
Even what alive you could, but I let slip  
The chance to ask you, I can correlate  
Only of you what memories dart and trip  
Through freckling lights and stop like a forgetful dancer.

Archaic gusto sprouted from a vase  
Of dancing satyrs, lips of a Gothic imp  
Laughing down from a church-top, inky fingers  
Jotting notes on notes, and piccolo and tympanon  
Importunate at the circus—but there lingers  
Also a scent of awe, a cosmic pause;

For you were a good mixer and could laugh  
With Rowlandson or Goya and you liked  
Bijoux and long-eared dogs and silken legs  
And titivated rooms but more than half  
Your story lay outside beyond the spiked  
Railing where in the night the blinded minstrel begs.

He begged and you responded, being yourself,  
Like Raftery or Homer, of his kind—  
Creative not for the counter or the shelf  
But innocently whom the world bewilders  
And so they observe and love it till their mind  
May turn them from mere students into builders.

Of which high humble company were you,  
Outside the cliques, unbothered with the fashion,  
And self-apprenticed to the grinding trade  
Of thinking things anew, stropping the blade  
You never used, your multicoloured passion  
Having been merged by death in universal Blue.

So what you gave were inklings: trivial signs  
Of some momentous truth, a footprint here and there  
In melting snow, a marginal caress  
Of someone else's words, a gentleness  
In greeting, a panache of heady wines  
Or children's rockets vanishing in air.

Look at these snapshots; here you see yourself  
Spilling a paint-pot on a virgin wall  
Or boisterous in a sailing-boat or bubbling  
At a Punch-and-Judy show or a music-hall  
Or lugging Clausewitz from a public shelf  
To make your private notes, thumbing and doubling

His corseted pages back. Yes, here and here  
You see yourself spilling across the border  
Of nice convention, here at a students' dance  
Pinching a girl's behind—to reappear  
A small boy twined in bracken and aprance  
Like any goatfoot faun to propagate disorder.

Here you are swapping gags in winking bars  
With half an eye on the colour clash of beet  
Lobster and radish, here you are talking back  
To a caged baboon and here the Wilshire sleet  
Riddles your football jersey—here the sack  
Of night pours down on you Provençal stars.

Here you are gabbling Baudelaire or Donne,  
Here you are mimicking that cuckoo clock,  
Here you are serving a double fault for set,  
Here you are diving naked from a Dalmatian rock,  
Here you are barracking the sinking sun,  
Here you are taking Proust aboard your doomed corvette.

Yes, all you gave were inklings; even so  
Invaluable—such as I remember  
Out of your mouth or only in your eyes  
On walks in blowsy August, Brueghel-like December,  
Or when the gas was hissing and a glow  
Of copper jugs gave back your lyrical surprise.

For above all that was your gift—to be  
Surprised and therefore sympathetic, warm  
Towards things as well as people, you could see  
The integrity of differences—O did you  
Make one last integration, find a Form  
Grow out of formlessness when the Atlantic hid you?

Whether you did or not, the fact remains  
(Though you yourself might think it nothing to shout of)  
That all your life till then showed an endeavour  
Towards a discovery—and if your pains  
Were lost the loss is ours as well; for you are out of  
This life and cannot start any more hares for ever.



## THE NEWS-REEL

Since Munich, what? A tangle of black film  
Squirming like bait upon the floor of my mind  
And scissors clicking daily. I am inclined  
To pick these pictures now but will hold back  
Till memory has elicited from this blind  
Drama its threads of vision, the intrusions  
Of value upon fact, that sudden unconfined  
Wind of understanding that blew out  
From people's hands and faces, undesigned  
Evidence of design, that change of climate  
Which did not last but happens often enough  
To give us hope that fact is a façade  
And that there is an organism behind  
Its brittle littleness, a rhythm and a meaning,  
Something half-conjectured and half-divined,  
Something to give way to and so find.

## THE KINGDOM

### ( i )

Under the surface of flux and of fear there is an underground  
movement,  
Under the crust of bureaucracy, quiet behind the posters,  
Unconscious but palpably there—the Kingdom of individuals.

And of these is the Kingdom—  
Equal in difference, interchangeably sovereign—  
The incorruptible souls who work without a commission,  
The pairs of hands that are peers of hearts, the eyes that marry  
with eyes,  
The candid scholar, the unselfish priest, the uncomplaining  
mothers of many,  
The active men who are kind, the contemplative who give,  
The happy-go-lucky saint and the peace-loving buccaneer.

These, as being themselves, are apart from not each other  
But from such as being false are merely other,  
So these are apart as parts within a pattern  
Not merged nor yet excluded, members of a Kingdom  
Which has no king except each subject, therefore  
Apart from slaves and tyrants and from every  
Community of mere convenience; these are  
Apart from those who drift and those who force,  
Apart from partisan order and egotistical anarchy,  
Apart from the easy religion of him who would find in God  
A boss, a ponce, an alibi, and apart from  
The logic of him who arrogates to himself  
The secret of the universe, the whole  
Choreography of atoms; these are humble  
And proud at once, working within their limits  
And yet transcending them. These are the people

Who vindicate the species. And they are many. For go,  
Go wherever you choose, among tidy villas or terrible  
Docks, dumps and pitheads, or through the spangled moors  
Or along the vibrant narrow intestines of great ships  
Or into those countries of which we know very little—  
Everywhere you will discover the men of the Kingdom  
Loyal by intuition, born to attack, and innocent.

( ii )

Take this old man with the soldierly straight back  
Dressed in tweeds like a squire but he has not a squire's  
    presumption,  
His hands are gentle with wild flowers, his memory  
Latticed with dialect and anecdotes  
And wisps of nature poetry; he is of the Kingdom,  
A country-lover and very English, the cadence  
Of Christmas bells in his voice, his face like Cotswold stone  
Severe but warm, a sureness in his walk  
And his blood attuned to the seasons—whether it is the glyptic  
Winter turning feathered twigs to stone  
And making the Old Bill pollards monuments  
Beside the dyke of Lethe—or if it is the frantic  
Calf-love and early oratory of spring—  
Or peony-time with the midges dancing—or later, sweeter,  
That two-in-one of clarity and mist,  
Of maidenlight and ripeness which is autumn:  
Every case is new and yet he knows the answers  
For he is of the Kingdom. Through the serene and chequered  
Fields that he knows he walks like a fallen angel  
Whose fall has made him a man. Ladders of cirrus cloud  
Lead down as well as up, the ricochet of rain  
Makes the clay smell sweet and snow in sunlight  
Affirms the tussocks under it. Such changes—  
The hedgerow stippled with hips or lathered with elder—

To him are his own rhythm like his breathing  
And intimate as dreams. Hirsute or fluted earth,  
Squares of plough and stubble, oatcake and corduroy,  
Russet and emerald, and the shot-silk evening  
And all the folk-song stars—these are his palette  
And it is he who blends them with the brush-strokes  
Of long experience and sudden insight,  
Being mature and yet naïve, a lover  
Of what is not himself—but it becomes himself  
And he repays it interest, so has had  
A happy life and will die happy; more—  
Belongs, though he never knew it, to the Kingdom.

( iii )

When she had her stroke the china dogs  
Did not even flinch, although they might have guessed  
That tomorrow no one would dust them, but the family  
Felt that this was an Act of God and did not see  
The syllogism slouched across the kitchen table,  
The inevitable caller; given poverty,  
Given two on the dole and one a cripple,  
Given the false peace and the plight of England,  
And given her matriarchal pride, her bones  
That would not rest, her arrogation of every  
Job in the house to herself, given her grim  
Good humour—her daily tonic against despair,  
Given her wakeful nights trying to balance the budget  
And given her ignorance of her own frailty,  
What other end was coming? They propped her up  
While the canary fidgeted with his seed  
And the clock hiccuped, being about to strike,  
And someone ran for the doctor: "Our Mother is taken bad."  
Everything in that house was mutually possessive:  
She was Our Mother, Dad was called Our Dad,

Connie Our Connie and the cat Our Tiger  
But now the most possessing and the most possessed  
Was on her way to leave them. They did not see  
Even that this was so, they did not see  
The tall clock stretch his arms like a rising Cross  
Or see the steam of the kettle turn to incense;  
*Our Mother is taken bad*—and that was all.  
They did not see that the only cable was broken  
That held them together, self-respecting and sane,  
And that chaos was now on the move. For they did not know,  
Except at times by inklings, that their home  
Remained a rebel island in the sea  
Of authorised disgust only because their mother  
Who thought herself resigned, was a born rebel  
Against the times and loyal to a different  
Order, being enfranchised of the Kingdom.

( iv )

“Drunk again! Where do you think you are?”  
“I think I am somewhere where I don’t belong;  
I chanced in here from the Kingdom.” And he crashed  
His heavyweight hand among the chipped and dented  
Vessels of false good-fellowship, went out  
Into the night with his chin like a bulldozer  
Churning a trough of fury; then the Night  
Being herself archaic and instinctive  
Welcomed his earthy anger, slapped him on the back  
And told him stories that were not wit but humour,  
Not smut but satyr-talk, not clever but wise,  
Not elegant but poetry. And his mouth relaxed,  
His head went back and he laughed, hearing the bugle  
That blows tomorrow morning, blows for a hard routine,  
Blows for the life automatic, for spit and polish and jargon  
And deference to fools, but blows also for comrades,

Blows for a gay and a brave unforced solidarity,  
Blows for the elemental community, blows for  
Knowledge of shared emotion past and future,  
(Blows for the static life that suddenly comes to  
Life with the smell at dawn of running engines)  
And blows as well—to those who have ears to hear  
And hands to strike—for the Kingdom.

( v )

Too large in feature for a world of cuties,  
Too sculptured for a cocktail lounge flirtation,  
This girl is almost awkward, carrying off  
The lintel of convention on her shoulders,  
A Doric river-goddess with a pitcher  
Of ice-cold wild emotions. Pour them where she will  
The pitcher will not empty nor the stream grow warm  
But is so cold it burns. Vitality and fear  
Are marbled in her eyes, from hour to hour  
She changes like the sky—one moment is so gay  
That all her words are laughter but the next  
Moment she is puzzled, her own Sphinx,  
Made granite by her destiny, encumbered  
With the dour horoscopes of dying nations  
Deduced from dying stars.  
So what can you expect? Behind that classic  
Forehead, under that smooth Renaissance dome,  
The Gothic devils revel around a corpse  
Allegedly a saint's and snuff the holy candles  
And cackle and deny—and their denial  
Torments her with a doubt. She raises once again  
Her pitcher, tilts it—Will the water flow?—  
And see, it flows, it flows, ice-cold as ever,  
Anarchic, pure and healing. For she filled it  
One day that is not dead at a lost well



Between two rocks under a sombre ilex  
In the grey dawn in a deserted corner  
Of the remembered Kingdom.

( vi )

A little dapper man but with shiny elbows  
And short keen sight, he lived by measuring things  
And died like a recurring decimal  
Run off the page, refusing to be curtailed;  
Died as they say in harness, still believing  
In science, reason, progress. Left his work  
Unfinished *ipso facto* which continued  
Will supersede his name in the next text-book  
And relegate him to the anonymous crowd  
Of small discoverers in lab or cloister  
Who link us with the Ice Age. Obstinate  
He canalised his fervour, it was slow  
The task he set himself but plotting points  
On graph paper he felt the emerging curve  
Like the first flutterings of an embryo  
In somebody's first pregnancy; resembled  
A pregnant woman too in that his logic  
Yet made that hidden child the centre of the world  
And almost a messiah; so that here  
Even here over the shining test-tubes  
The spirit of the alchemist still hovered  
Hungry for magic, for the philosopher's stone.  
And Progress—is that magic too? He never  
Would have conceded it, not even in these last  
Years of endemic doubt; in his perspective  
Our present tyrants shrank into parochial  
Lords of Misrule, cross eddies in a river  
That has to reach the sea. But has it? Who  
Told him the sea was there?

Maybe he told himself and the mere name  
Of Progress was a shell to hold to the ear  
And hear the breakers burgeon. Rules were rules  
And all induction checked but in the end  
His reasoning hinged on faith and the first axiom  
Was oracle or instinct. He was simple  
This man who flogged his brain, he was a child;  
And so, whatever progress means in general,  
He in his work meant progress. Patiently  
As Stone Age man he flaked himself away  
By blocked-out patterns on a core of flint  
So that the core which was himself diminished  
Until his friends complained that he had lost  
Something in charm or interest. But conversely  
His mind developed like an ancient church  
By the accretion of side-aisles and the enlarging of lights  
Till all the walls are windows and the sky  
Comes in, if coloured; such a mind . . . a man . . .  
Deserves a consecration; such a church  
Bears in its lines the trademark of the Kingdom.

( vii )

All is well, said the voice from the tiny pulpit,  
All is well with the child. And the voice cracked  
For the preacher was very old and the coffin down in the aisle  
Held the body of one who had been his friend and colleague  
For forty years and was dead in daffodil time  
Before it had come to Easter. All is well with  
One who believed and practised and whose life  
Presumed the Resurrection. What that means  
He may have felt he knew; this much is certain—  
The meaning filled his actions, made him courteous  
And lyrical and strong and kind and truthful,  
A generous puritan. Above whose dust



About this time each year the spendthrift plants  
Will toss their trumpets heralding a life  
That shows itself in time but remains timeless  
As is the heart of music. So today  
These yellow fanfares in the trench re-echo,  
Before the spades get busy, the same phrase  
The preacher lost his voice on. All is well,  
The flowers say, with the child; and so it must be  
For, it is said, the children are of the Kingdom.

( viii )

Over the roofs and cranes, blistered cupola and hungry smoke-  
stack, over the moored balloons and the feathery tufts of  
searchlights,  
Over the cold transmitters jabbering under the moon,  
Over the hump of the ocean big with wrecks and over  
Our hide-bound fog-bound lives the hosts of the living collect  
Like migrant birds, or bees to the sound of a gong:  
Subjects all of the Kingdom but each in himself a king.  
These are the people who know in their bones the answer  
To the statesman's quiz and the false reformer's crude  
Alternatives and ultimatums. These have eyes  
And can see each other's goodness, do not need salvation  
By whip, brochure, sterilisation or drugs,  
Being incurably human; these are the catalytics  
To break the inhuman into humanity; these are  
The voices whose words, whether in code or in clear,  
Are to the point and can be received apart from  
The buzz of jargon. Apart from the cranks, the timid,  
The self-deceiving realist, the self-seeking  
Altruist, the self-indulgent penitent,  
Apart from all the frauds are these who have the courage  
Of their own vision and their friends' good will  
And have not lost their cosmic pride, responding

Both to the simple lyrics of blood and the architectonic fugues  
of reason.

These have their faults like all creators, like  
The hero who must die or like the artist who  
Himself is like a person with one hand  
Working it into a glove; yes, they have faults  
But are the chosen—because they have chosen, being  
Beautiful if grotesque and wise though wilful  
And hard as meteorites. Of these, of such is  
Your hope, your clue, your cue, your snowball letter  
That makes your soft flakes hard, your aspirations active;  
Of such is your future if it is to be fruitful,  
Of such is your widow's cruse, your Jacob's ladder,  
Of such is the garden of souls, the orchestration of instinct,  
The fertilisation of mind, of such are your beacons,  
Your breaking of bread, your dance of desire, your North-  
West passage,  
Of such is the epilogue to your sagas of bronze and steel,  
Your amnesty, your advent, your Rebirth,  
The archetype and the vindication of history;  
The hierarchy of the equal—the Kingdom of Earth.

## POSTSCRIPT

When we were children words were coloured  
(Harlot and murder were dark purple)  
And language was a prism, the light  
    A conjured inlay on the grass,  
Whose rays today are concentrated  
    And language grown a burning-glass.

When we were children Spring was easy,  
Dousing our heads in suds of hawthorn  
And scrambling the laburnum tree—  
    A breakfast for the gluttonous eye;  
Whose winds and sweets have now forsaken  
    Lungs that are black, tongues that are dry.

Now we are older and our talents  
Accredited to time and meaning,  
To handsel joy requires a new  
    Shuffle of cards behind the brain  
Where meaning shall remarry colour  
    And flowers be timeless once again.

*June, 1944*





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